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Recreating the Faculty Role in University Governance

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It is not clear that the parts of the university add up to a greater whole. One of the problems is the fragmentation of faculty who are distributed in departments, schools, and colleges isolated one from the other. This fragmentation has led to the virtual collapse of governance in public universities, which causes a variety of serious problems. Aided by previous thinking, I will consider whether and how governance and faculty participation might be redefined in the public research university in a way that encourages more faculty participation (Benjamin, 2003; Benjamin & Carroll, 1997, 1998; Benjamin, Carroll, Jacobi, Krop, & Shires, 1993) The public research university seems ideal for this subject because it is where most graduate education takes place and thus develops the future professorate that teaches in other sectors of higher education (Steck, 2003).

If governance at the institutional level, now dormant in most public research universities, can be revived, albeit in a new form, perhaps the lessons can be applied elsewhere. Why is this issue an important question? Why not simply be content with the corporate model of university governance, which emphasizes efficiency in resource allocation and appears increasingly accepted? The answer is that the university does not produce private goods. It produces public goods. Attempts to limit decisions in universities to narrow market-like efficiency criteria are inappropriate in this setting.

Public goods (in this case education, research, and services) cannot be reduced to simple exchanges between interested parties. Their production and consumption require many participants and much sharing in production and consumption to produce goods of high quality. Faculty involvement is needed to produce results of such quality.

I will attempt to show why this assertion has merit by distinguishing the roles of teaching and learning from research. In addition, I will introduce the role that general education and assessment might play in giving faculty across the institution a common language they might use to reengage at the institutional level in public research universities. It should be clear at the outset that this chapter rests on a set of assumptions that lead to a possible scenario; it adopts the public choice approach (Benjamin, 1980; Harsanyi, 1969; Lindblom, 1990). Public choice adherents assume that institutional change is driven by the presence of mixes of incentives and sanctions that persuade individuals to respond. Conversely, they view cultural arguments as useful descriptions but not explanations of behavior. How do individuals and the institutions they inhabit change if they are not forced to make choices about the costs compared to the benefits of taking new action? Given these assumptions, public choice adherents (Hirschman, 1970; Hirschman & Rothschild, 1973) posit an ideal type, a synthesis gleaned from the “real” world that if realized would create the imperatives for change in individual and hence institutional behavior.

This chapter therefore proceeds in the following manner. After restating the problem of the decline of shared governance in universities, I develop a set of distinctions between research and undergraduate education. My argument here is that the research enterprise, especially sponsored research, has become too complex for consideration by

the traditional structure of faculty senates. Apart from anything else, these bodies include the “have” and “have-not” professors when it comes to getting large research grants. Professors in the humanities, much of the social sciences, and several professional schools lack the opportunities for lucrative funded research. However, all faculty units do participate in undergraduate education, with the humanities and social sciences in featured roles. If faculty interest in undergraduate education can be raised from the department to the institutional level, it could revive a renewed interest by faculty senates in discussing and recommending university-wide policies on improving undergraduate learning, especially general education.

For this result to occur there must be strong incentives and/or the prospects of sanctions that entice or compel faculty to set their sights on improving teaching and learning at the institutional level. The positive incentives relate to the benefits accruing from raising the quality of undergraduate education—better retention and graduation rates and better incoming students over time. The potential negative sanctions in this case flow from the accountability movement in higher education that increasingly demands real evidence of student learning. I create an argument based on my understanding of the direction of this accountability movement and the probable or possible responses by the faculty in public research universities. It offers a plausible model—not a description—of the accountability and assessment literature in higher education. To be plausible, the model reflects my thinking about the intersections between accountability and assessment requirements. The utility of this chapter will depend on how much it encourages readers to think about the problem of spurring greater faculty participation in university-wide governance.

GOVERNANCE

Elsewhere, I define governance as the decision-making units, policies and procedures, written and unwritten, that control resource allocation in universities and colleges (Benjamin et al., 1993). This characterization focuses on all the actors, both internal and external to the institution, who influence resource allocation. And resource allocation is not limited to financial resources but also includes the distribution of prestige, goal setting, and development and maintenance of the vision and mission of the institution.

Why Faculty Participation in University Governance Is Important

Faculty remain the critical lynchpin for the following:

- Deciding what curriculum is taught
- Choosing the pedagogy used
- Determining what departments and fields within them exist and their size and emphasis
- Deciding individually what research is stressed
- Defining and implementing the criteria and evaluation for determining the quality of faculty
- Defining functionally the standards of admissions and graduation for students

Because these factors define much of the activities of the university, without faculty support, explicit or at least tacit, deans, provosts, and presidents struggle or are ineffective. Another critical consideration is the public assumption by the collective faculty of the equality of all fields of knowledge within the university (Benjamin &

Carroll, 1996). Though few individual professors believe all fields are equal, they are reluctant to argue publicly that any one field is less important than another. In part, professors want to avoid alienating colleagues in other departments. In addition, the salience of fields has often shifted. Physics was dominant in the early 20th century and microbiology grew in importance near the end of that century. Obscure fields in veterinary biology dealing with retroviruses became vital with the discovery of AIDS. Despite shifts in demands and importance of fields, professors are reluctant to recommend restructuring or cutbacks in other departments or colleges. The administration and trustees must therefore take the lead in reallocations as well as reductions because of the faculty's reluctance to cut publicly their colleagues' programs.

Despite this faculty reluctance, the administration cannot provide direction to public universities without persuading the faculty of the necessity for reductions and reallocation. The faculty need not participate in making cuts and shifts, but it must accept their necessity. A second point is that the board of trustees and the central administration formally set standards for admission and graduation. But the faculty implements and interprets the meaning of those standards. If there is not congruence between the definitions of those standards by the faculty and the administration, the goals of the administration and board of trustees are not achievable. In the end, the faculty implements the vision and mission statements of the institution they serve. If the faculty does not accept the vision and mission statements of the institution, they remain paper documents only. Finally, the developments in new and old fields of knowledge, as practiced by the faculty of a research university, create the sparks of innovation that produce paradigm shifts. Therefore, if the faculty is not involved in the governance of the

university, the institution is diminished greatly because the administration is only a bureaucratic infrastructure dedicated to enabling teaching, research, and service. Any university becomes a hollow structure without the rich advice of its faculty about the university's goals based on their diverse knowledge from a range of fields.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE CHANGED ENVIRONMENT

There was a time, from before World War II until the early 1990s, when the increases in demands on colleges and universities roughly matched the growth in resources. In retrospect, growth in student enrollment and faculty positions seemed orderly and slow. Under these conditions, each of the three major internal partners of university governance—trustees, administration, and faculty—played well-understood and mutually reinforcing roles. The three actors may have operated in rough concert because of a general agreement about the nature and goals of teaching and research—two of the central functions of the university (the other being service). The era before World War II preceded the compact between the federal government and the university that generated the extraordinary growth in large-scale research in the health sciences, engineering, and a number of applied areas. It also predated the focus of universities on externally funded research. Under these conditions, professors across the university had an interest in seeing the distribution of resources somewhat equitably across fields. In undergraduate education, a campus consensus at least tacitly existed, that students needed a common core of liberal education in order to graduate. Faculty had an interest in participating in the senate that oversaw the terms of engagement for undergraduate curriculum across the university.

Faculty played a strong role, through the faculty senate, along with the administration and trustees and the trustees at the institutional level. This process became known as shared governance (American Association of University Professors, 1996). “As essential participants in the governance process, each acts as a checks-and-balance mechanism by which the power of the other is counterbalanced. Both better decisions and broader decision acceptance can be anticipated as a result” (Del Favero, 2003,p. 906). Measures of success of the ideal include achievement of consensus and widespread acceptance of decision-making (Benjamin & Carroll, 1998). Where did this ideal occur? The answer is where memberships of faculty senates consisted of distinguished faculty at the institution, and where administrations developed university policy in close collaboration with the faculty senate. The assent of most top administrators from prominent roles in faculty senates exemplified this close cooperation.

In fact, a strong possibility of the breakdown of this ideal always existed. The reason is that at least two of the participants—the faculty and the administration—could and did claim the same piece of the governance pie: control of the allocation of resources in the broadest sense. For example, administrators controlled the financial resources. Faculty controlled the curriculum, who taught it, and who should be recommended to teach it. Why did cooperation rather than conflict characterize the relationship between these two groups? There was a “traditional” environment in which supply and demand factors remained in reasonable equilibrium, growing roughly the same rate until the 1990s. But such stasis, if it ever really existed, has changed dramatically. Growth had become exponential and diverse in demands for more research, both theoretical and

applied; in student enrollment, especially a more heterogeneous student body; and in fields outside the traditional arts and sciences.

By comparison, the growth in the share of resources for public universities from state budgets has steadily declined. In the early years of the 21st century, acute budget cuts in many states have left public universities in the position of having to reduce funding for some programs. Moreover, the volatility of budgets and new demands for instruction and research make the classic shared governance model slow, inefficient, and inadequate to meet the demands of this competitive, dynamic world of public research universities. Under these conditions, state boards of higher education demand greater control (Carlin, 1999), the accountability movement grows, and apathy toward participation by professors in university governance increases (Lazerson, 1997). Shared governance appears, say Breneman (1995, 1), poorly suited “. . . to the sorts of wrenching challenges that lie ahead.” The question remains, what should replace it?ⁱ

Over the 1950s and 1960s, the typical public research university grew substantially and the “multiversity” became the unquestioned organization (Kerr, 1995). With size come economies of scale (so it is thought), greater efficiency, and greater effectiveness. Another term for this is *critical mass*. With great size comes a large faculty with differentiated skills and interests which, in turn, means that many more interests of students for instruction and potential clients for research can be accommodated. With great size also comes economies of scale regarding the development of one physical plant design team, say, for an entire state’s higher education system, the facilities management group, the finance office, and so on. Moreover, the size and complexity of the faculty and ancillary enterprises grow dramatically as well (Benjamin et al., 1993). And, outside the

institution, accrediting agencies, coordinating and system boards, the state legislature, and a variety of special interest and advocacy groups exert pressure, sometimes requiring the college to respond to demands ranging from the context and rigor of the curriculum to the number of books in the library.

Such size and complexity could only exist by ceding much of the academic governance to the academic departments. The concept, fully developed by the early 20th century, claimed that specialists in the fields of knowledge know best what to teach, who should teach what subjects, and what to do in research. Senior members of the departments know best what quality means in their fields and which professors deserve recommendations for promotion, tenure, and merit increases. Of course, deans and vice presidents had to agree, but they really held only the power to block, not initiate. And in any event, the department typically reports to a dean within a college, another separate unit in the university. These colleges in research universities stand in isolation one from the other. Campus governance arrangements promote a departmental and not a university view of the critical issues of research focus and undergraduate education, especially that part accenting the liberal arts and sciences for all undergraduates. In most public research universities, the concept of a core curriculum as the venue for a liberal education has disappeared. Under such conditions, professors argue that their courses or their department major is the appropriate level of analysis for undergraduate education.

Incentives and rewards for professors are also department based in the research university. A primary reason is that research productivity determines the merit pay of faculty and their recommendations for promotion and tenure. And the senior members or chair of one's department determine the criteria to make judgments about the level of

research productivity of individual professors. Multi- and interdisciplinary research centers increasingly join in this role of judging research. They are often formed to receive the external funding that drives many research programs and, in turn, the careers of scientists and engineers. Deans and provosts can confer on and deny promotion, tenure, or merit increases but departmental specialists who can best judge research results initiate the recommendation. Under these conditions of departmental or college dominance, the university becomes an abstract notion not of practical relevance to the day-to-day activities of professors. Departments, colleges, and multidisciplinary centers constitute the real world of recommendations and resources for professors.

THE NEW GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

Today, in a number of key areas, university leaders find themselves in uncharted territory. For example, priorities in research have shifted. Multidisciplinary research increasingly replaces single, department-based research at the frontiers of knowledge. The infrastructure for large-scale science has become so great that several entities have to fund these projects. Increasingly those partnerships link universities and industry. The latter provides equipment, researchers, and funding, morphing such assets into virtual labs that allow both industrial and university scientists to work jointly on research programs. The leaders of such projects become successful scientific entrepreneurs who make their own arrangements and commitments with the central administration of universities and businesses and federal research agencies. Under these conditions, it is difficult if not impossible to figure out how to set research priorities for the faculty at the university level. However, undergraduate education—especially general education—may well be a different matter.

Undergraduate education in most public research universities has a bewildering number of majors and distribution requirements in general education. The concept of a core curriculum is typically absent. Under such conditions, faculty representatives on college- or university-wide curriculum committees engage in logrolling when voting on the new courses submitted for approval by other departments. They tend to vote yes in the hope and expectation that the other department representatives will reciprocate when their turn comes to submit proposed courses for approval. The result is a factionalized curriculum with no real incentive for faculty to focus on setting the institutional learning goals for undergraduates. Hence, faculty no longer focus on the quality of undergraduate education, and faculty senates no longer consider it a critical issue.

As noted earlier, the absence of comparative evaluation criteria for setting priorities for resource allocation constitutes a special challenge for university governance. In addition, a seemingly limitless number of internal and external actors have some claim, role, or influence on resource allocation. The net result is that the degrees of freedom for action in the university are reduced. The faculty role in governance becomes problematic because the institution no longer clearly governs itself in terms of the definition offered earlier. It is not surprising that the distinguished professors do not participate in faculty senates, whose influence withers away. Indeed, fragmentation raises the question of whether it is even appropriate to speak of a university. The whole of the university is no longer clearly more than the sum of its parts.

The fall in state funding has not helped the unity of the university, since it encourages the production of self-generated income from research, tuition, and gifts at the college, school, and department levels. My prediction of the steady decline in the

percentage of state budgets allocated to higher education has accelerated in the early years of the 21st century (Benjamin, 1998). All indications are that this trend will continue. Universities have attempted to make up the difference with tuition increases. These annual increases have been at or above 10% from 2002 to 2004 followed by stabilization of public university budgets in most states. There is increasing concern that upper limits exist to tuition growth, because they increase student debt and threaten access to postsecondary education by underrepresented groups. Faced with the prospect of continued financial erosion, all parties in public research universities have an incentive to maximize their claims on the university budget.

HIGHER EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC GOOD

Higher education, particularly undergraduate education, is a public good. *Public good* means if the good is supplied to one individual it is supplied to all members of the community or class. Classic public goods are such items as national defense or K–12 education—if supplied to one American they are supplied to all. Similarly, the environment (good or bad), health, and education are thought of as public goods. In the real world of the 21st century, we know that the classic distinction formulated by Samuelson (1967) is not so clear. Public goods also produce private benefits. Private goods such as airlines produce public goods if a single airline serves a small community in a rural state.

Clearly, undergraduate education has been and should be treated as a public good served by a set of institutional arrangements called the university. We will explore the consequences of the erosion of this understanding of public goods. The obverse—private goods—are market based and the product of a simple transaction. Party A desires good B

and party C supplies good B to party A at an agreed price. Both parties are presumably satisfied, otherwise they would not agree to the transaction. Public goods are not easily partitioned into sets of well-defined producers and consumers. That is why we call them public goods in the first place. We agree to tolerate ambiguity of production and consumption in public goods precisely because the good they bring is thought to be so critical to all members of society.

DIFFERENCES OF FACULTY RESEARCH AND UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

- The contribution of the individual to research can usually be ascertained, for example, by the quantity and quality of research papers, the size and number of research awards, and the number of citations.
- The contribution of the individual faculty member or even the individual department to the knowledge and skills acquired by graduates is not easy to ascertain, for example, because standards for grades for students vary from one faculty member to another, from department to department, and across colleges, and because general education skills in student learning are not generally assessed; courses and majors are, but these are difficult to compare.

University-wide research priorities can be established. However, based on the assumption of the equality of knowledge and department-based governance, it is understandably difficult for the faculty collectively through senates to contribute effectively to this process. Funding requirements to mount successful efforts in area A of science detract from the possibility of doing so in area B of science. Such conflicting interests may be why scientific entrepreneurs make their own arrangements with provosts

and presidents. Although the public position of these officers claims the importance of undertaking research in all fields of knowledge, externally sponsored research gets most of the attention from the administration. The stability of funding of public as well as private research universities now increasingly depends on it. The administration may not resist research and scholarship in the social sciences, humanities, and some professional schools. But the provision of funding is where the assumption of the equality of knowledge stops for the central administration. Large-scale science projects, which generate significant external funding, dominate the decisions of presidents and provosts. Those decisions provide matching funds, commit faculty positions, and allocate money for laboratory equipment and space mainly for science, engineering, and medicine. In contrast, faculty senates, which represent the collective faculty, cannot realistically deal with research because it divides their constituency into haves and have-nots. As a result, faculty as a whole have a disincentive to participate in governance related to the research mission on a university-wide basis.

UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Undergraduate education currently does not attract the attention of the university faculty. Little incentive exists for participation on a university-wide basis in deliberating on matters, such as the knowledge and skills graduates should possess and the means of assessing their achievement. But this neglect could change, for the following reasons.

Most university mission statements insist that their institution exists to improve critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and communication skills, or what may be called the skills of liberal or general education. These skills exhibit public good-like qualities. No one department course or major produces them and all graduates should have them.

Individual faculty may and do argue that since they do not teach these skills in their departments they should not be evaluated for their achievement by students. Nor should assessment of student learning be focused on their acquisition. This position has carried the day until very recently. Now, employers, commentators, and observers of higher education increasingly argue that it is these public good-like skills that are precisely what undergraduate education should improve. That narrow content or specialization should not be the major focus of undergraduate education. Undergraduate education should teach students how to think and not only train them to be proficient in a specific academic field. From this perspective, the institution, not the department, becomes the focus of assessment because no one department produces or improves these skills. But such a shift would prove surprising given the history of the fragmenting university over the past 50 years.

THE CASE FOR THE WHOLE

Departments are important. The majors they offer students are essential. But it may be time to also consider the institution as the key unit of academic analysis. Outsiders are certainly calling for it. Education is not only about specialized content, it is about teaching students how to think. All institutions commit to improving the critical thinking skills of their students. These sentiments are etched in most mission statements of colleges and universities. Employers increasingly call for improvements in the critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and communication skills of the graduates they hire. Surveys of the informed public indicate the same desire. It is the promise of the institution to improve these general education skills. In this sense, undergraduate education may be considered a candidate to be a public good again, if a way can be found

to provide a discourse that faculty and administrators can use for communicating across departmental boundaries.

UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION AND UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

How can focusing on improving undergraduate education unite the faculty and renew university governance and faculty senates? First, we must view undergraduate education as a public good that produces improvements in the general education skills of critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and written communication. Next, to make faculty comfortable in focusing on improving undergraduate education, we must encourage the development of an assessment system that gives faculty the information needed to make effective changes in the curriculum, pedagogy, and other internal processes affecting undergraduate education.

It is admittedly a tall order to convince faculty to focus on improving undergraduate education and to create an appropriate assessment system to support that effort. How can we focus faculty attention on the quality of undergraduate education? And how can we promote the faculty senate as the venue for decision-making that fosters institutional improvements in undergraduate education? My approach is based on the public choice assumptions that incentives and sanctions (existing or the prospect of) drive individuals who make up collectives such as faculty to change their behavior. What follows is a sketch of an argument for focusing faculty thinking in a more systematic way on the quality of the general education component at the institutional level. I am not arguing this scenario will be played out tomorrow. We will see whether and when the argument gets played out in real time in public research universities.

Putting aside the questions of timing, I believe that undergraduate education will be gradually more differentiated from research, and that faculty will increasingly focus on the quality of undergraduate education at the institutional level.

This result may occur initially because of real and perceived accountability pressures but also because of the rewards associated with improving teaching and learning. I make the case for using an assessment approach to provide the discipline and common language necessary for the quality of undergraduate education to become a focal point of a strengthened role of faculty in university governance. This argument uses assessment as a method of reviving faculty governance.

THE ARGUMENT

The “public” (taxpayers, legislators, and governors) wants to be assured that their college students are receiving a quality education. This interest in accountability is fueled by the same factors that have led to higher tuitions, namely shrinking state budgets and the increasing cost of higher education (Jones, 2003). In the past, institutions relied on accreditation reviews and various types of actuarial data, such as graduation and minority access rates, to demonstrate quality. That approach is no longer adequate for colleges, just as it no longer sufficient for K–12 education (as evidenced by No Child Left Behind legislation and the emphasis on statewide testing of students).

The public wants to know whether its education institutions are helping students acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities they will need when they graduate (Immerwahr, 2000). In addition, policymakers increasingly want to know how much students actually have learned, not how much they believe that they have learned. Forty-four states have established accountability systems (Burke & Minassians, 2002) for

higher education.ⁱⁱ Seat time, course grades, and graduation rates are no longer sufficient. In short, the public is increasingly asking its colleges and universities to show that acceptable progress has been made in student learning.

To satisfy this demand for accountability, higher education institutions need to demonstrate that their students have acquired important skills and knowledge in addition to achieving other goals such as graduating, achieving necessary prerequisites for professional schools, and gaining employment. The only credible way to show such learning is to test them on what they are supposed to know and be able to do. Institutional ratings, student and faculty surveys, and other indirect proxies are just not sufficient. Instead, direct measures of outcomes are needed. Colleges and universities already assess students, but hardly ever for the purpose of demonstrating the value the institution adds to a student's knowledge and skills. At least until recently, their reasons for testing have had nothing to do with accountability. Instead, colleges and universities have tested incoming students to make sure they have the skills needed for coursework. Students with insufficient skills are generally placed in remedial programs. In addition, some colleges administer tests at the end of the sophomore year to make sure students are ready for their upper-division studies. These so-called rising junior exams, like the initial placement tests, focus on basic reading, writing, and math skills. They focus on the individual student without attempting to measure the contribution of the institution to student learning.

Some colleges are now expanding their testing programs to include assessing other abilities, such as critical thinking skills, that are central to the college's mission but cut across academic majors. College administrators see this as a way to demonstrate the

beneficial effects of the educational experiences at their institutions to prospective students and their parents.ⁱⁱⁱ Nevertheless, most institutions continue to rely on their faculty—individually not collectively—to assess their students’ content knowledge and skills.

This approach satisfies the faculty, who generally believe professors already provide sufficient and appropriate assessments of student learning. They use midterm and final exams, term papers, classroom participation, and other evidence to assign grades. And they feel these grades reflect how much students learn in their courses.^{iv}

Unfortunately, professor grades are idiosyncratic. Two courses with the same title may cover different content, even at the same college. There also are large differences in grading standards among professors across colleges. What constitutes B work at one school may correspond to A or C work at another institution. The same is true across professors within an institution.^v There also has been substantial grade inflation over time.^{vi} Hence professor-assigned grades cannot be relied on to provide a valid measure of whether the students in one graduating class are more or less proficient than those in another class or at another college. Nor are value-added comparisons made of the contributions of institutions to growth in student learning from entry to exit. Some other metric is needed.

The search for another index has led some colleges to experiment with portfolios, grades in capstone courses, or other institution-specific indicators of learning (Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996). However, all these measures have the same fundamental limitation as regular course grades, namely, the absence of a way to interpret reliably and validly scores outside the context of a particular course or school at a given

point in time. To correct that problem, the measures have to be administered under the same standardized conditions to everyone and the scores obtained have to be adjusted for possible variation in average question difficulty, reader leniency, and other factors. Locally constructed measures, such as course grades or portfolios, do not have these essential features and therefore cannot be used for making valid comparisons within institutions over time or for comparisons among institutions at a single point in time.

Those limitations are not present with the measures that are used for statewide K–12 testing (such as the Stanford-9, Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress), college and graduate school admission decisions (such as the SAT, ACT, GRE, and LSAT), or licensing exams in the professions (such as accountancy, law, medicine, and teaching). Thus, when results really matter, such as for high-stakes decisions about individuals, procedures are used that help to eliminate the effects of extraneous factors, such as who drafted the questions or scored the answers.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

States have a legitimate and critical role in assuring accountability in their higher education institutions. Many states set objectives for educational levels to be achieved by entering students; participation rates by ethnic/racial groups; minimum passing scores for law, medicine, and other professional schools; and numbers of graduates in particular fields to be achieved such as teaching, nursing, and technology.^{vii}

The states also provide the instructional budgets for public undergraduate education and infrastructure support, including buildings, libraries, and scientific equipment. States clearly have a right and a responsibility to require accountability from the institutions they support. Why, then, are we not further ahead in developing

assessment systems of student learning that work from the point of view of the institutions and the states?

The problem is that the assessment measures used at the institutional level differ from most of the accountability indicators favored by states. First, the concept of accountability must be specified. Most broadly, in the context of higher education, accountability can be defined as the extent to which public higher education institutions meet the goals set for them by the state. (In the best case these goals are mutually agreed to by both parties.) Just as faculty and institutions set assessment goals for a variety of purposes, states set accountability goals for different purposes. Most states desire accountability for prudent use of resources, or at the very least, absence of fraud. Some state leaders demand evidence of increased participation, retention, and graduation rates for underrepresented groups. Still others, an increasing number, want to be assured that students have gained knowledge and skills from their educational experiences. Approaches and measures of student learning favored by faculty differ from those preferred by state leaders. Here we focus on this last goal of state-based accountability, evidence of student learning outcomes (Naughton, Suen, & Shavelson, 2003).

Approaches to student learning outcomes by faculty have the following characteristics:

- Their goals are to improve curriculum and pedagogy as well as set targets for students.
- They focus on individual students, departments, or to a lesser extent institutions but not on inter-institutional comparisons.

- They are content rich, tailored to the context of the institution, and generated by faculty themselves and are often time intensive and costly.
- Because the emphasis is on content, they tend not to be replicable from one institution to the next.

In comparison, state-based approaches are:

- Focused on accountability objectives
- Aggregated at the regional or state level and ideally replicable and comparable across institutions
- Centered on indirect proxies of student learning outcomes such as the percentage of passing rates for teaching examinations
- Inclusive of teacher, nurses, and other professional school examinations; number and percentage of students that take the GRE; retention and graduation rates
- Poor in content or tailored to the context of the individual institutions and not developed by faculty
- Use cost-effective methods, making use of existing data

The result is a disconnect between the faculty and institutions on the one hand and the state on the other.

ASSESSMENT PRINCIPLES

The assessment principles adhered to by institutions need to be comparative based in some manner and focused on general education skills in order to respond to the accountability requirements. Here is what that would entail.

Measures whose scores are interpretable across professors, colleges, and time allow relevant comparisons to be made within and between institutions. For example, the scores on such measures can be used along with grades on other tests (such as the SAT or ACT) to assess whether the students at a school are doing better or worse on an outcome measure than would be expected given their entry-level skills. Measures that are applicable across institutions also may serve as benchmarks for interpreting the results with similar but locally constructed instruments or course grades. Measures that are designed to permit comparisons across institutions thus provide a signal of academic performance (and therefore a motivator for change). Such signaling can indicate whether the faculty and administrators need to take a closer look at the resources, curriculum, pedagogy, and programmatic structure underlying undergraduate teaching and learning. In short, such measures may help colleges document the progress they are making in fostering student learning. The measures also may contribute to improving academic programs by providing institutions with baseline and outcome scores to help identify the effects on learning of programmatic and curricular changes.^{viii}

To accomplish these ends, cross-institutional measures must have certain essential characteristics. The scores must be reliable in the sense that they are not overly affected by chance factors. If the results are aggregated to the university level (such as to providing information about programs), then the degree of reliability required to identify effects is much less than would be needed for making decisions about individual students. The scores must be valid in the sense of providing information about student characteristics that are important to the institution's goals, such as improving their students' ability to communicate in writing and to think critically about issues. The tests

themselves must be fair to all takers, that is, regardless of the students' demographic or other characteristics. Finally, results have to be reported to students and institutions promptly and in a way that is understandable to the recipients and facilitates decision-making.

The process of implementing such measures at the university level is fraught with land mines. For instance, any top-down effort to impose them on faculty and students is likely to run into trouble.^{ix} Instead, it will be essential for the academic community to see them as a valuable adjunct to its own measures or even embed them into capstone courses. Similarly, attempts to use the results to punish institutions for having less than stellar or even average improvement scores would stop the assessment effort in its tracks. Instead, the results need to be used to identify best practices that other institutions could try as well as to spot potential problem areas where additional support is needed. In addition, the measures themselves must be intrinsically interesting and engaging so that students will be motivated to participate in the assessment activities and to try their best to do well.

It is not feasible to measure all or even most of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are central to college or university learning goals. Much of what is learned takes place outside the classroom. This situation leads to the concern that what is tested will be overly emphasized in the institution's instructional programs. In short, some will say that the only abilities that count are the ones that are measured. This position is akin to saying "You shouldn't measure anything unless you can measure everything." This concern can be addressed by varying the types of measures used over time and by augmenting the measures that are used across institutions with local program-specific instruments.

States are increasingly developing assessment systems that emphasize accountability. Resistance by faculty to accountability-oriented systems of assessment (that are focused on indirect, proxy measures of student learning) also continues and is unlikely to change. This reaction is unfortunate, even problematic if, as I believe, the state-level demand for accountability is only going to grow. We should reject the argument that the unit of analysis for accountability must be only the state (Callan, Doyle, & Finney, 2001; Callan & Finney, 2003; National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education, 2000) or the argument that the unit must only be the institution (Banta et al., 1996). How might we reconcile the implications of the two units of analysis? The prime focus of accountability should be on student learning. And it is the growing insistence on the part of the state that institutions be held accountable for the quality of their student learning that, I predict, will drive faculty to implement the principles of assessment noted above in the service of an increased focus on the quality of general education at their institution.

If the growing pressure convinces faculty to focus more attention on the quality of general education, representatives of the state and institutions will need to work out the equivalent of a legal agreement that both parties will implement. These rules of engagement must give both parties incentives to cooperate. What should the rules of engagement be? There must be agreement on the measures to be used. The measures must meet faculty objectives but the ability for inter-institutional comparison should be built in to satisfy the needs of the state. Although the two parties need to agree on common measures to be used, their goals are different. Since faculty are primarily interested in assessment for educational improvement while the state is primarily

interested in assessment for external accountability, the two parties will need to reach agreement on what information from the assessments may be aggregated at the regional or state level.^x

Relations between the institution and the state will improve immensely if there is agreement that the initiative should focus on increasing the value-added contribution of the institution to general education skills over time rather than on absolute levels achieved. Indeed, if there is agreement that the value-added approach is appropriate, there can be a time lag built in during which institutions identified as being below minimum levels of quality can be asked to show improvement over a several-year period. Since institutions, as well as the state, are interested in demonstrating that they are improving, this strategy should provide common ground between the two groups.

BRIDGING THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

There is a disconnect in assessment and accountability goals focused on student learning between the institution and the state. Can it be overcome by the state exerting control through its levers of power—that is, the power of the purse or regulation? Probably not, or, to put it another way, the result would certainly be a pyrrhic victory with no winners on either side. Can the disconnect be bridged? The answer is yes. It appears that, increasingly, state leaders will be judged on how well they improve the skills of their workforce to make their states more competitive economically.^{xi} Faculty and administrators will come to recognize the right of state political leaders to be concerned about the quality of undergraduate education. As a result, they will accept the right of states to set goals for improvement in student learning outcomes at their public colleges and universities. Eventually, along with the growing recognition that the role of the state

in setting goals is reasonable, should also flow state-based incentives, accepted by higher education leaders as appropriate, to encourage their public higher education institutions to meet those goals. This result will occur because of the growing recognition, by all parties, that human capital is the most important asset possessed by a region, state, or nation (Krueger, 2003). However, in the case of higher education, reliance on the experts (the faculty) to define the most appropriate methods of assessment is, necessarily, a prerequisite to success. This recognition of the need to work together by faculty and administrators at the university on the one hand, and state leaders on the other, may well take some time and the road getting there will likely be bumpy. However, if human capital is as important as we believe, state and national leaders will ultimately be entrusted with the task of setting standards for improvement in student learning. If we reach a wider consensus on how to implement this principle, we will be able to develop policies and practices in assessment that benefit the institution and the state and, most importantly, the citizens both serve.

A NEW ROLE FOR THE FACULTY SENATE

If public universities start down this road, a number of important policy questions must be answered. And these questions, I believe, will call for substantial faculty input, again, on an institution-wide basis.

1) Assuming the assessment done uncovers the need for improvements, what, if any, assessment data should be made public to outside agencies and on what terms?

This question enters uncharted territory. State commissions and departments of higher education are calling for evidence of performance. To date, faculty have generally resisted their requests; or the data collected has been sufficiently far from the classroom that faculty can ignore the process of data collection and the results. Faculty might well react differently if data on direct measures of cognitive learning, as discussed earlier, are assembled. Faculty will probably wish to use the information for formative assessment purposes. State officials will want to use the information for summative, evaluative purposes.

The rules for what data should be reported publicly and to whom can be sorted out. But there must be a real bargaining process, with faculty involved in this negotiation. Where else would the faculty make their case than in a representative assembly such as the faculty senate?

2) Assuming the assessment results cover all the programs, departments, and colleges in the public research university, what role, if any, should they play in resource allocation?

For example:

- Should more funding go to units that have lower results from the assessment of student learning to improve them?
- Should units that do well on the same measures get more resources to reward them?
- Should instructor/student ratios be lowered in order to improve student learning outcomes?

- Should there be fundamental changes in the curriculum on a university-wide basis, for example, establishment of a core curriculum?
- Should there be changes in pedagogy?

These and related questions need the input of the faculty if the university is to respond to them properly. What other venue makes sense than the faculty senate? Since there are a variety of questions there would be increased business for the senate education committee, the budget committee, and the committee on facilities and instructional equipment. Since the humanities and social sciences faculties, by definition, play an important role in the undergraduate curriculum, heightened attention to improving teaching and learning should raise the profile of these parts of the faculty.

If the movement to focus on general education skills in addition to courses and majors succeeds, institutional forums will again become the venue for deliberation and recommendations by faculty across the university. If the faculty senate is nonexistent or moribund, it will have to be recreated to provide such a venue. If this comes to pass, there will be a variety of side benefits that will reconnect the faculty and the administration in public research universities. And that will be a good thing.

A NOT SO MODEST PROPOSAL

The time has come to offer a proposal that could not only revive university-wide faculty governance in faculty senates but also the central importance of the arts and sciences faculty on campus. It could also breathe new and needed life into student learning assessment.

1) Faculty or university senates should once again take charge of the goals, courses, content, and outcomes of general education.

No single move could do more to fix the fragmented university at the undergraduate level, answer the complaints of external critics about learning outcomes of graduates, or restore the arts and sciences faculty to their appropriate role in university governance and undergraduate education. The proposal focuses on general education, because that is the collective responsibility for the faculty—especially in the arts and sciences, while academic majors belong to the diverse departments.

2) Senates should appoint a blue-ribbon faculty commission of leading professors—largely from the arts and sciences—to propose the goals, content, and outcomes of general education.

Such a step would end the common practice in public research universities of leaving general education requirements to the determination of colleges and schools for their own majors. These commissions should draw heavily on the excellent work in general education of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). This group notes that employers and academics already agree on the desirable outcomes of general education (AAC&U, 2005). It includes the intellectual and practical skills of written and oral communication; inquiry and critical and creative thinking; quantitative and information literacy; teamwork; and the integration of learning. The knowledge derived from general education should also involve an appreciation of the arts and humanities, the social sciences, and the sciences and mathematics.

3) That commission—with assistance of faculty and staff experts in evaluation and institutional research—should develop the multiple methods for systematically and periodically assessing the extent to which graduates actually acquire that knowledge and those skills, and propose how to use the results to improve institutional performance.

Reliable information and evaluation techniques are the hallmarks of scholars. This proposal would ask leading scholars in the arts and sciences to bring the same tools they use in research to evaluating the knowledge and skills acquired by students during their college years.

NOT PROBABLE, BUT POSSIBLE AND DESIRABLE

Academic skeptics will sneer at both the possibility and the desirability of this proposal. Even campus realists, looking at the record, may well deny the possibility of this proposal, while perhaps accepting its desirability. Both will doubtless pose that fateful question: What will make faculty senates and the faculty in the arts and sciences tackle now what they have assiduously avoided for decades—addressing and assessing general education?

The answer is simple. Taking charge of general education and assessing its results is now in the self-interest of the arts and sciences faculty, especially those from the arts, humanities, social sciences, and the sciences with limited opportunities for funded research and less than burgeoning demands for undergraduate enrollments.

Four potent forces are coalescing to make the adoption of this proposal possible, if not probable: pressure, power, prestige, and payoff.

Pressure

The pressure, especially on public research universities, to both demonstrate and improve the knowledge and skills of undergraduates has never been stronger. State, business, civic, and now federal leaders are demanding it. Faculty leaders probably accept the skills and knowledge listed earlier as the goals of general education. But they have clashed over the methods or courses that best achieve those objectives and have resisted assessing learning outcomes, especially those that require or encourage institutional comparisons. Clearly, the faculty, especially in public research universities, does not want to assess student learning outcomes.

One prospect may well change the faculty's position. That is the growing probability that outsiders will impose the goals of undergraduate learning and the methods of assessing their achievement. Either the faculty will do it, or outsiders will do it for them. Faced with that choice, the faculty will decide to do it.

Power

The faculty in most of the arts, humanities, social sciences, and even some science disciplines cannot be happy with the way that the professional schools have hijacked general education, or dismissed its importance in the name of job training. (That unhappiness hides their own preference for specialized courses in their disciplines over their responsibility for general education.) How it must grate on professors in those areas to read on their university web sites that students should look at the listings of their colleges and schools to discover the course requirements of general education.

Taking charge of general education and its assessment is not only a self-defense against outside imposition, it is the way to power in faculty governance. The move to

have faculty senates and arts and sciences faculty take charge of general education and assessment will win strong support from trustees, presidents, and provosts. Given the numbers of professors in the arts and sciences, they represent clear majorities in the faculty senates. The way to power is clear. Arts and sciences faculty have the numbers and the expertise. All they need is the will.

Prestige

Once, the prestige on campus went to the liberal arts and sciences for their special contribution to undergraduate education. Now the shift of prestige mostly to sponsored research has diminished the position of professors especially in the arts, humanities, and the social sciences, where large research grants are scarce.

The fragmentation of general education, along with the university, has ended that special position of the arts and sciences. It has prevented the arts and sciences faculty from getting the benefits from their natural accent on synthesis and connections across the disciplines, which should bring prestige when problems both theoretical and applied fall increasingly in the connections among the disciplines. Prestige in an age of collaboration, cooperation, and connection should go to the faculty in the arts and sciences. But first that group must ensure that the general education conveys those connections and that graduates can use them to solve complex problems.

Payoff

Even the most idealistic professors at this point might well say “Power and prestige are fine but what about the financial payoff?” There is money in taking charge of general education. Governors and legislators would reward well a public university that identified

the knowledge and skills expected of its graduates and assessed the extent of their achievement. In turn trustees, presidents, and provosts would happily provide funding for a program that responded in an academically responsible way to those demands for accountability. Presidents and provosts know that only the faculty can and should develop such a program. Clearly, they would reward the effort.

Another possible result is that a new metric for faculty rewards other than research productivity may emerge. The way it might work is that financial incentives are offered to faculty participating in general education in response to their achieving demonstrated improvements as measured by value-added growth, answering the question of how much improvement in the growth in general education skills of students occurs. Thus the arts and sciences faculty could receive some part of their merit pay increases based on the contribution to general education.

Another funding benefit is not so obvious. Not all departments in the arts and sciences can attract large research grants or increasing student majors, which these days produce the lion's share of departmental funding. Tuition is a rising source of income in public research universities as they increase enrollment to close the gap in revenues from the fall in state funding. To encourage such self-generated income, many universities have adopted variations of Responsibility Center Management or budgeting that allow colleges and schools to keep most of their earned income. Some of these systems give most of the tuition income to the units that register the majors. The University of Michigan has taken a different tack that could increase the financial payoff to colleges, schools, and presumably departments in the arts and sciences enrolling general education students. It allocates 75% of the tuition income to course enrollments rather than major

registrations (Michigan Engineering, 2004). Such a provision could prove a real boon to arts and sciences departments offering attractive courses that fulfill the general education requirements.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Daniel Burnham, a Chicago architect at the end of the 19th century, challenged his colleagues “to make no small plans.” Now is the time for public research universities to once again think big with the breadth, style, and verve that once characterized governance proposals from the faculty in the liberal arts and sciences. This not so modest proposal seeks to save general education from specialized training, silence the external critics on student learning, and revive academic senates as centers of university governance. Even in this age that glorifies multitasking, that is no small plan. But perhaps it is a proposal big enough to interest the arts and sciences faculty in public research universities.

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ENDNOTES

- i) See several chapters in Tierney (2004) that extend this point.
- ii) See Naughton, Suen, and Shavelson (2003), who recorded 227 indicators related, in some way, to student learning. See also *Measuring Up* (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002), which gives student learning an incomplete for all the states. WASC the regional accrediting association now requires evidence of the quality of student learning. See the web discussion of this topic (www.wasc.org). See also the publications and activities devoted to this subject by the national accrediting body, Council for Higher Education Assessment.
- iii) The number of colleges developing general education programs is rising, led by national associations of higher education such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002). And most colleges embed the goal of increasing these skills in their mission statement. See also Immerwahr (2000) for a discussion of the expectations of parents and students about higher education.
- iv) Moreover, although attendance at meetings on higher education assessment held by groups such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities has increased in recent years, we believe most faculty remain skeptical of the kind of assessment discussed here.
- v) For example, Klein, Kuh, Chun, Hamilton, and Shavelson (2005) developed a method to deal with the problem of widely divergent grading patterns across institutions. They converted GPAs within a school to z-scores and then used a regression model (that included the mean SAT score at the student's college) to adjust the correlations with GPAs for possible differences in grading standards among colleges.
- vi) For example, Harvard University, where, until 2005, 90% of the undergraduate students were deemed honors students, is, like other institutions, attempting to cope with the problem of grade inflation. (Donadio, 2005).
- vii) See the master plans of state higher education coordinating commissions or governing boards of state higher education systems, for example, Texas and Nevada.
- viii) With at least two noteworthy exceptions—the Cooperative Institutional Research Program and the National Survey of Student Engagement—efforts at higher education assessment have focused on developing approaches and instruments that deal with individual courses or majors that are often diagnostic in nature. However, one needs assessment data that permits comparison in order to successfully conduct formative assessment within institutions. The variation in learning goals and teaching approaches is enormous across American higher education. How can one know how well an institution is faring unless one compares the performance of the institution with that of other institutions?
- ix) Norms ceding power to faculty on key issues remain strong. These norms were developed over time in the wake of the construction of the modern American university during the last quarter of the 19th century. Graduate research functions were married to the undergraduate mission. That move created the basis for the

professional development of the doctorate as the final degree for faculty along with the recognition that only those who received the Ph.D. in their field should make decisions about the issues noted earlier. Central administrators and boards of trustees may decide the size of the undergraduate enrollment, the resources that go to each department or college. However, the faculty must rule on curriculum matters, including whether and how to assess its quality.

- x) On the relationship between assessment focused on the formative (the institutional focus) versus the summative (the state focus), the literature on this subject with respect to K–12 assessment is instructive. See William and Black (1996) and Shepard (2003).
- xi) For example, see the publications devoted to aspects of this topic on the National Governors Association (NGA) web site (www.nga.org). The NGA is the official association for the 50 governors.

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